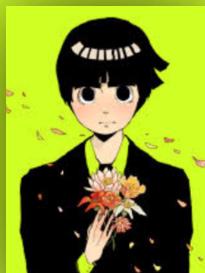




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Ninja Funeral



100 13 11

Chapter 1 by SaintSayaka

A ninja funeral.

It sounds like the punchline to a terrible joke, until you actually go to one and see the mourning firsthand.

Chapter 2 by R



You'd known about him, known about your brother, but it's still shocking to see all of these strangers at his funeral. They look normal, dress normal, blend in to the crowd. What would you expect from Ninjas?

None of them speak, or mention his name, but each places flower petals on to his grave. There is a sadness in all of their eyes, a profound sadness, and in most of them regret, or guilt.

How did your brother die? Was it because of this? Because of his activities.

You don't know. But you will find out.

Chapter 3 by SaintSayaka



Many younger sisters shift through the crowd, expecting to find moldy food, condoms, maybe some girls.

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You sigh, folding another pile of clothes onto your legs. Your brother didn't own a lot of stuff to begin with, living in a small apartment and all. But you've already been here for five hours, physically unable to throw away his things. The best you've done is to throw a few things into a garbage bag for Goodwill. Throwing away a life like this, whittling it down to material goods, it just feels beyond wrong.

A hand rests on your shoulder. This time, you don't scream. Ninjas have been stealthily approaching you for weeks to offer their condolences, seeing no reason to hide the truth anymore.

"Need I ask how you got into the apartment, ninja?" you ask, somewhat snottily. You have little reason to be in a good mood, anyway. But the hand does not retreat.

"If you're accusing me of breaking in, I'll have you know that you left the door unlocked."

You blush. That was a bit embarrassing. "S-sorry."

The figure kneels at your side carefully, almost as if they're studying you. You refused to look into their eyes, but can see enough from peripheral vision - blonde hair, blue eyeshadow, and a black tank top. Not exactly what you were expecting from a ninja, but you're learning more by the passing week that ninjas are nothing like what you expected.

"Look, I know that you're not exactly our biggest fans. And I can't blame you. But Rising Star...sorry, Jameson...wouldn't want you to avoid us like this."

"How am I supposed to know that? Clearly, I knew nothing about him. I didn't even know that he had an ninja name until halfway through the pastor's speech."

She sighs, perhaps out of impatience or genuine sadness. "He only lied to you for your own protection. He knew what type of danger he was putting himself into."

You say nothing, but the female ninja continues on.

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"Excellent. My name is Crashing Tide."

You turn to look at her for the first time since her arrival, and offer a blank look. She coughs.

"...ooooooooor you can just call me Amanda, yeah?"

Chapter 4 by Spirit



What the heck had happened to my life.

Your brother had died, and now I was following a random person who you only assumed to be a ninja, and not some psychopath, somewhere. I mean, this wasn't the stupidest decision, but now that you look back on it . . . it wasn't the smartest decision either.

Anyway, you followed this woman outside. A black sedan was parked in your driveway. Oh, look, ninjas drive cars. For some odd reason, you always thought that they hadn't. Maybe it was just because your brother hadn't had one, but you weren't entirely sure. You figure that it makes sense that they drove cars, but you're also kind of disappointed. Whenever you imagined a ninja traveling, you always imagined them jumping from building to building, or something of the sort.

"Are you coming?" The ninja, or Amanda, as she called herself looked at you strangely. You snapped out of my train of thought, and followed her. Yeah, let's follow every stranger that we meet and get into their car. That's the smartest thing to do. Maybe she even had candy for me. Let's take candy from strangers.

In any case, you followed her into the car. You drove, and drove, and drove some more. Throughout the entire drive this 'Amanda' character didn't say a word, which increased the boredom factor in the car, and subsequently your depression. Oh joy.

You don't know when I had fallen asleep, maybe at an hour and a half. I did however remember her waking me up ever so clearly. You had fallen asleep, my face pressed against the back of the seat. Your mouth was hanging open, drool dripping down your chin. Your hair rested in your

mouth as if you had been chewing on it in your sleep.

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Amanda shook you and shook you and shook you to wake up. Five more to get out of the car, and five more to

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You were looking out over an expanse of rolling hills, rocky spires jutting out of the ground here and there. A few large, leafy green trees stood around the area.

"So, are you ready?" Amanda asked you.

"Ready for what?" you replied, swaying back and forth ungracefully.

"Why your training, of course. Didn't someone notify you? You've been chosen to become a ninja yourself" She looked at me, her deep blue eyes boring into my soul.

". . . Really?" You retorted. No, this couldn't be right.

"Yes." She replied, sounding dignified.

"Oh joy." You sighed. This was great, just great.

And with that you collapsed into the grasses below you.

Chapter 5 by intellikat



The days turned into weeks and then flowed into months. In time, you began to ignore the passage of time completely as Sensei Darnell (or Chocolate Panther) had encouraged you to do from your very first fumbling kata.

At first, your grey gi had hung sloppily around your undisciplined body, but over the course of thousands of practice blows and repeated poses it becomes firm and taut. Wooden staffs break across your back, splintering into multitudinous shards and yet you feel nothing. Immersed in icy streams over the winter months, your heartbeat slows and your vision expands to take in the possibility of wolves and other predators around you. Your movements become indeed like water as opponents rush you armed with fist, stick, and blade only to be disarmed and thrown to wooden dojo floor in crumpled heaps.

Chocolate Panther watches all in silence. When you catch his eye for a brief moment after

dispatching the final foe, you see him nod ever so slightly and offer a fist-bump which you respectfully meet with your own.

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That evening, the archer's stall is dark. Chocolate Panther rises from the low table, having completed the training session with you. You know that this is the most important moment to

your training, and occurring in chapter five will signal a mad rush to the climax of the story.

Chocolate Panther lifts a bow from the wall of the stall and steps to the edge. In the distance, you can see the target dimly lit by single candlelight.

Chocolate Panther nocks the arrow and faces you calmly. Without looking, he draws the cord and lets loose a single shaft that strikes the target in the middle. He lowers the bow and offers it to you.

You step to the edge and nock a fresh arrow. You look at Chocolate Panther and let loose your own unseen shot, which splits his arrow's shaft into three parts and buries itself as well in the center of the target.

Chocolate Panther nods silently. He takes the bow and draws yet another arrow. More quickly than you could imagine, he looses it. It flies off-target and passes through the candle flame, extinguishing it completely. The target box drops into inky blackness.

Chocolate Panther seems to grin, and you take the bow one final time. This time, you nock three independent arrows, breathe deeply, and loose the triad in a singular mighty shot.

The first arrow breaks the sound barrier and ignites with the friction created against the air which also slows its pace. The second arrow flies just a bit slower, thereby uninterrupted by friction, and instead of slowing down at the breakpoint, travels at a continuous pace and passes the first flaming arrow. The third arrow accelerates beyond the speed of sound, both going supersonic and yet not being slowed. It shatters the second arrow while still in flight, passing through its narrow body, emerging in the fore, and then shattering the earlier arrow lodged in the heart of the target.

The first arrow, travelling the slowest, glides through the candle's wick, reigniting it and revealing the result of your masterful shots as the target box leaps to light once again.

Chocolate Panther can no longer contain his delight and lets out a holla. You hollaback. The two of you sit once again at the tea table and he pours two cups excitedly.

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"From this moment on, you are my friend," he says, lifting his cup and clinking with yours. "But not my enemy."

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You sense the change of tone and drain your cup.

"Your brother did not die of natural causes. In fact, it is very rare that any ninja dies of natural causes. It is something of an embarrassment, you know, to be hospitalized for kidney failure or a stroke at age 82. Makes others wonder how dangerous any of your battles ever were. Some years ago, two ninjas from white clan and black clan made an agreement to choreograph their fights, like WWF, so that no one ever got seriously hurt but it appeared that they were having some intense combat every third day or so. Both had independent contracts with Nike and Puma respectively, and were drawing handsome salaries from marketing and promotion. Well, when their secret got out, you can imagine they didn't end up dying of natural causes as they had planned. Anyhoo, your brother was murdered by red clan assassins. And it will be your task to avenge his death."

Chocolate Panther turned back the edges of folded cloth on the table to reveal my brother's shiny shuriken.

"It is typical to avenge a death with the weapons of the deceased. I'm sure your brother will be proud, watching you from that great torii in the sky."

I took the shuriken and held them up to the candlelight.

"I am proud of you, Vanilla Three-Scoop," said Darnell, placing one hand on mine. I could feel the heat of life pulsing through it. "Come back when you have avenged your brother's death."

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